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**One Hundred Fifteenth Congress**  
**U.S. House of Representatives**  
**Committee on Foreign Affairs**  
2170 Rayburn House Office Building  
Washington, DC 20515  
[www.foreignaffairs.house.gov](http://www.foreignaffairs.house.gov)

May 22, 2017

The Honorable Rex Tillerson  
Secretary  
U.S. Department of State  
2201 C Street NW  
Washington, D.C. 20520

Dear Secretary Tillerson:

I write you today in advance of the 2017 U.S.-Vietnam Human Rights Dialogue in Hanoi to urge you to prioritize human rights in U.S. relations with Vietnam. I am encouraged by the growing relationship between the United States and Vietnam and also believe that demonstrable progress on human rights is critical to further deepening of U.S.-Vietnamese ties.

The government of Vietnam has long restricted the basic rights of its citizens. Though there has been improvement in some areas over time, the 2016 Department of State Human Rights Report on Vietnam described a range of systemic abuses, from limitations on political participation and civil and religious liberties to the denial of due process in a corrupt and ineffective judicial system.

In 2016 the Vietnamese government escalated a crackdown on dissident bloggers and other human rights activists, imprisoning at least 112 as of January according to a report by Human Rights Watch. One such blogger, Nguyen Ngoc Nhu Quynh, was arrested after criticizing the government response to a toxic chemical spill and charged with conducting propaganda against the state. I urge you to advocate her freedom as well as for that of other prisoners of conscience.

Mr. Secretary, I am deeply concerned about a comment you made this month in which you seemed to suggest that when the United States places emphasis on human rights it “creates obstacles to our ability to advance” U.S. national security and economic interests. As the country’s most senior diplomat, this comment signaled to the world that the United States was retreating from its customary position as a defender of human rights and I hope that you would clarify your statement.

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I believe that respect for human rights and human dignity are, in fact, not simply American values, but universal values. I also believe that our advocacy for more free and open societies around the world is not just our moral obligation, but indeed fundamental to our national interest.

Thank you for your attention to this critical issue and I look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



Eliot L. Engel  
Ranking Member  
House Foreign Affairs Committee